

## The Role of Women in the Java War: A Case Study of Estri Soldier

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### ABSTRACT

The Java War (1825–1830) was not only interpreted as a political and military conflict between Prince Diponegoro and Dutch colonialism, but also as a space that showed the active role of women in the struggle. One of the most prominent manifestations is the existence of the Estri Soldiers, a women's army formed since the era of Raden Mas Said (Mangkunegara I) and has a strategic role in the defense of the Kingdom of Mataram. This research aims to reveal the contribution of the female soldiers in the military, social, and political dimensions of the Java War through the framework of Carl von Clausewitz's guerrilla war theory, Hannah Arendt's whole society approach, the concept of Women, Peace and Security (WPS), and strategic feminism. The method used is qualitative with a literature study of the main works of Peter Carey & Vincent Houben (2016) as well as other archival and secondary sources. The results of the study show that Estri Soldiers are not only supporting actors, but also frontline combatants with combat skills, elite guards of the king, logistics managers, and agents of symbolic diplomacy. This role affirms that women are an integral part of the total war strategy, with significant political impact in maintaining the legitimacy of power. Through the lens of WPS, it was also found that Estri Warriors had realized gender-based participation, protection, and prevention long before the concept was formulated at the global level. This research emphasizes the importance of an inclusive reconstruction of historical narratives, in which women are placed not as objects of war, but as strategic subjects in national defense.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Java War (1825–1830) was one of the largest conflicts in the archipelago in the 19th century that not only changed Java's political landscape, but also left behind a complex social and cultural legacy. This war was also affiliated with one figure who was so famous in the struggle of the Indonesian nation against colonialism, namely Prince Diponegoro. According to Sari (2016), the Javanese war can be said to be a war led by Diponegoro, a figure who was so strong in the influence of the Javanese war that lasted half a decade. However, there is also another role that is no less important that Peter Carey describes in the history of the Java War, namely the presence of the Estri Soldiers.

Historical evidence suggests that women from the nobility and common people played a strategic role in various aspects of the resistance – from logistics and intelligence to direct involvement on the battlefield. The most prominent manifestation of this involvement is the existence of the Estri Warriors, an integral women's force in Diponegoro's war strategy (Carey & Houben, 2016).

Asyhad (2023) is of the view that, in the Islamic Mataram kingdom, there were a number of female soldiers who were deliberately formed by Prince Sumbernyawa or better known as Raden Mas Said who was also the king of Kangjeng Gusti Pangeran Adipati Arya Mangkunegara I. He was one of the heroes of the war against Dutch colonialism and recaptured Surakarta from the hands of the Dutch kingdom in 1743. Raden Mas Said was the one who formed the Estri Soldiers, selected women who were deliberately trained in horsemanship, shooting, swords, and fighting.

This Estri soldier was led by Rubiyah, who was titled Raden Ayu Matah Ati, a daughter of a regional official in Wonogiri at that time. Raden Ayu Matah Ati is also the second wife of Raden Mas Said. Estri's soldiers were not only a combat force, but were also described as the king's personal bodyguards and played a role in welcoming palace guests.

To further explore the role of Estri Soldiers in the Java War, the researcher wants to use four complementary theoretical frameworks. First, Carl von Clausewitz's concept of guerrilla warfare, which viewed war as a continuation of politics in another way and emphasized the importance of mobility, surprise, and popular support to keep up with the greater forces of the opponent (Clausewitz, 1976/1832).

Second, the whole society approach, inspired by Hannah Arendt, emphasizes that public space and collective action involve all elements of society, not just political or military elites (Arendt, 1958). Third, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) framework of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which focuses on four main pillars: participation, protection, prevention, and recovery (United Nations Security Council, 2000). Although WPS is a modern concept, its principles are effectively used to re-read the role of Estri Warriors as strategic actors that go beyond traditional gender norms.

The approach of strategic feminism as described by Matondang (2020) also enriches the reading of the role of women in armed conflicts, especially in seeing women as part of a military strategy, not just an object of protection, in this case

Estri Soldiers as part of the supporting component forces in the defense of the Mataram royal forces at that time.

By combining these four frameworks, the research aims to uncover the contribution of Estri Warriors to the military, social, and political dynamics of the Java War while reconstructing a more inclusive historical narrative, in which women are recognized as a core part of the struggle. Therefore, the research question asked in this study is how the role of female soldiers in the Java War. Then, how is this role seen in aspects of combat and guerrilla strategy, social mobilization and internal diplomacy, as well as gender empowerment and community protection?

This study illustrates the empirical role of Estri Soldiers during the Java War, starting from recruitment, weaponry, to field operations (*da sein*). Then evaluate the role normatively based on Clausewitz's principles of guerrilla warfare, Arendt's whole society approach, and the WPS (*da sollen*) pillar.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarship on the Java War (1825–1830) has largely focused on its political, religious, and military dimensions, particularly emphasizing Prince Diponegoro's leadership and resistance against Dutch colonial domination. Seminal works by Peter Carey and Vincent Houben frame the conflict as a combination of Javanese millenarianism, elite court politics, and colonial military expansion. While these studies provide a comprehensive macro-historical understanding of the war, they tend to marginalize or briefly mention women's participation, positioning them primarily as supporters, victims, or symbolic figures rather than as active military agents. As a result, the gendered dynamics of warfare and the strategic roles of women within Javanese resistance movements remain underexplored.

More recent historiography and feminist military studies have begun to challenge androcentric war narratives by highlighting women's participation in guerrilla warfare, logistics, intelligence, and political mobilization. Theories such as Clausewitz's concept of total war, Hannah Arendt's whole society approach, and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda provide analytical tools to reinterpret warfare as a collective societal effort rather than a male-dominated battlefield. However, applications of these frameworks to Southeast Asian colonial conflicts – particularly the Java War – are still limited. The literature has yet to systematically integrate strategic feminism and WPS perspectives to examine historical female military units such as the Estri Soldiers, creating a significant gap that this study seeks to address.

## METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with the literature study method (library research), which emphasizes a deep understanding of the meaning and context of narrative sources (Sugiyono, 2013). The primary data source is the book "Mighty Women in Java in the XVIII–XIX Century" written by Peter Carey and Vincent Houben with a thickness of 112 pages with an International Standard Book Number (ISBN) 9786026208163. This book should be a source of

data because it presents the historical complexity of the Java War comprehensively from colonial archives, contemporary records, and field research (Carey & Houben, 2016).

Secondary data sources include articles and scientific journals available in open source on the internet and libraries and official historical records of the Government of the Republic of Indonesia through publicly available channels. The data collection process includes literature search, source criticism to assess credibility, and analysis through idealistic philosophy, data presentation and drawing conclusions related to the theoretical framework.

## RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study found that the strong role of women in the Java War, especially directly related to the battle through the Estri Soldiers. They were not only involved as secondary actors, but also as combatants on the front lines, holding weapons, riding horses and drawing swords. Their role was also seen not only during war, but also during peacetime to maintain the existence of the Mataram Kingdom's defense force in the past with various data and facts found through the following literature review:

### *Estri Soldier*

Estri soldiers are described as special soldiers whose members are all female. Peter Carey gives an overview of the Estri Warriors from various sources who have seen them firsthand, both when they were on the battlefield, when they were cavalry, to when they were guests and the king's bodyguard.

The Estri warriors were formed by Raden Mas Said to protect the Mangkunegaran kingdom of Surakarta in the 19th century. They were once described as the king's personal bodyguards when appearing in public or meeting guests from other countries. Estri warriors are also said to hold many weapons, ranging from shields, bows, poison arrows, spears, slingshots, to rifles. However, their role is also not only called as combatants, but also carriers of the king's equipment and several items that will be given to the king's guests.

The number of Estri Warriors was described by Peter Carey through the records of Rijklof van Goens (1619-1682), an extraordinary Dutch ambassador who was sent to meet the Mataram palace in the 17th century. In his notes, it was stated that the Estri Soldier corps consisted of 150 young women who were not only trained to hold weapons, but also to sing and dance, as well as play musical instruments. In addition to the guard troops, it is also described that Estri Soldiers have a special army of cavalry soldiers.

As for uniforms, Estri Soldiers are said to have noble clothes like Javanese men for combat officers called *warrior* uniforms. This is corroborated from the evidence of the bodies of former Estri Soldiers during the Java War who joined Diponegoro, they were found in full military clothes.



Figure 1, a female soldier on horseback depicted in the manuscript of the Huishouding Palace (doc. National Library of the Republic of Indonesia 2025).

The soldier's uniform for female soldiers is illustrated in Figure 1 in the manuscript of the Huishouding Palace (1935) which shows a female figure on horseback with a belt tucked in front of her. In the picture it is explained using the language of the manuscript *Ing ngandhap is the picture of the princess amainaken suspiciously mawi kasuduk-sudukaken* which has a meaning: below is a picture of a princess playing a keris with a stabbing movement. In addition, there is also an illustration in Figure 2 showing two female soldiers practicing spears.

The manuscript provides an illustration with the translation of *Ing ngadhap is a picture of a princess who is smart watang* which has a meaning: below is a picture of princesses who are proficient in spearing. This warrior outfit is used for the performance of the Warrior Dance which is confirmed as an artistic tradition for Semarang Regency, Central Java as a reminder of the struggle of Prince Sumbernyawa or Raden Mas Said who is also the king who formed the Estri Warriors.

### ***The Role of Women in War as a Political Continuation***

Clausewitz emphasized that war was not a separate activity, but a political continuation by military means. In the context of the Java War, the historical record shows how women were integrated into the strategic logic of the conflict, not as ornaments, but as elements of political-military power. Peter Carey and Vincent Houben illustrate this vividly in the historical account he reveals when the Estri Soldiers flaunted their dexterity and warlike power in front of the country's guests of the time. "Forty fully armed women, girded with a dagger tucked there, each holding a sword or a rifle, must be admitted to be an admirable escort force." (Carey & Houben, p. 19)

This gives the impression of Estri Warriors as the king's personal bodyguards projecting authority, who has power and power in front of public audiences and state guests. Their existence adds to the political dimension of the

show: local power is reinforced by female military symbols. Clausewitz called the "show of power" as important as a clash of arms, because it undermines the morale of the opponent. Hutabarat (2017) said that more skilled and trained female peacekeepers can only be an asset for future peacekeeping operations. This is what the Estri Warriors are aiming for.



Figure 2, the female warrior on horseback depicted in the manuscript of the Huishouding Palace (doc. National Library of the Republic of Indonesia 2025).

This style of Estri Warrior is also referred to as power through acting in concert by Hanah Arendt. Because these female warriors were not only present, but acted as a coordinated military unit as the embodiment of the essence of Arendtian power. Courage and discipline build internal solidarity as a woman's political position in a conflict, a way for woman to show her strength. As Kusuma (2022) says, The integration of gender perspectives in national security policy can increase the effectiveness, legitimacy, and public trust in security institutions."

The researcher also found that the Estri Warriors once demonstrated the integration of logistical and ceremonial elements in a military unit in a strong state system, in this case the Kingdom of Mataram in the past. Logistics is not just the procurement of goods, but an instrument of diplomacy and propaganda. In Clausewitz, the logistical and moral factors of the public are equally strategic: a well-maintained army increases the political legitimacy of the leader.

The way Estri Soldiers welcomed guests not only showed their qualified and trained military strength, but also gave an idea that their defense in terms of logistics wealth was also no joke. This is described by Peter Carey when Estri Soldiers prepare logistics for state guests according to their preferences. Apart from being a propaganda tool, the purpose of "war as a political continuation" is also present in the Estri Soldiers. Masruro (2021) said that women are one of the people who play a big role in life, especially in the sustainability of a country's progress. This is also stated in Abukhaer's research which states that "the role of women in social, economic, and health aspects is part of the country's defense strategy." (Abukhaer Tatara & Retnaningsih, 2023, p. 127). In this context this

research is evidenced by the incident of ten of the Estri Warriors they brought royal equipment such as drinking water vessels, betel and perfume boxes, tobacco pipes, golden umbrellas, and special clothes given to favored guests (Carey & Houben, p. 18).

Another discovery was when Jan Geeve, Governor of the Northeast Coast of Java (1743) wrote his admiration when he saw the Estri Warriors in action in Surakarta Mangkunegaran. They rode horses, and fired salvos in order. The ability of the Estri Warrior made Jan Geeve tremble and imagine how strong and skilled the Estri Warrior troops were in playing weapons, including using Javanese-made light cannons at that time. On this occasion, Clausewitz once argued that military success is not only a matter of winning on the battlefield, but also of its political impact. The use of artillery and cavalry maneuvers by Estri soldiers can be seen as a form of strategy that had a political effect that made the Dutch envoys tremble.

This is also proof that Javanese women at that time, especially Estri Soldiers, were not only present, but also actively played a role in the dynamics and tactics of defense politics in the past. As Sutantri (2023) revealed, in general, men are often involved in conflicts as soldiers, war volunteers, and others, while women can only witness it without being allowed to play the same role as men. Women are also often the victims of these wars. But behind that, it turns out that women are also able to play a role as the initiator of solutions to conflicts that arise in a region (Sutantri, 2023).

#### ***Role Through Action and Public Space***

Hannah Arendt asserts that power is born from collective action in the public space, separated from violence, and manifested when people come together as political actors. The following Peter Carey quotes reflect how Javanese women both as soldiers and supporters generate political power through collective action and public appearances.

This can be seen when a king of Mataram wants to meet with the public, he is not only accompanied by officials, but also escorted directly by Estri Soldiers. Peter Carey called them Abdi Dalem Priyayi Manggung or Keparak Estri Soldiers, the equivalent of the security forces of the head of state in the current modern era. Arendt called this method a *public appearance*, appearing openly as a symbol of collective power and power.

Soldiers who escort the king as an elite force give the impression of the king's aura of authority and legitimacy to women as important defense actors of a country in the public eye and in the face of threats to state security. This is in accordance with the principle of gender equality which emphasizes the position of men and women to have equal positions, rights, obligations and opportunities, both in the family, society, nation and state as well as in development activities in all fields. (Tupamahu & Korlefura, 2023).

The power without violence that Arendt put forward as an act of resistance was also carried out by the Estri Soldiers. They played the role of not only combatants who were on the front line, there was also work they did behind the scenes, as Peter Carey revealed during the Java War, the Estri Soldiers helped

provide gunpowder in the villages west of Yogyakarta, which brought cash and valuables to the war areas.

This logistical action is a form of non-violent power or power without violence. They play an active role in organizing resources, and creating new political spaces as facilitators of military action, and expanding collective influence. The dual role, as a combatant is also part of the total war strategy. Along with the times, women have a more intensive role in encouraging efforts to handle armed conflicts and maintain post-war peace (Matondang, 2021).

Another role came from Raden Ayu Yudokusumo, a leader of the Estri Warriors war force when they tore through the economic path of the Dutch and the Chinese community in Ngawi, East Java on September 17, 1825. The troops she led were known as the all-out slaughter squad and were given the title of "an intelligent but scary woman". Raden Ayu Yudokusumo was called by Peter Carey as one of the senior commanders of Diponegoro's cavalry outside the Yogyakarta area. The peak of Raden Ayu's struggle was in October 1828 when he had to surrender in front of the Dutch troops and chose to cut off all his hair as a form of loyalty to the country.

Raden Ayu Yudokusumo had a great influence or called Arendt as a power of influence, apart from being a war leader, she was also the daughter of an official of the regent of Yogyakarta in the Eastern region. The strength of individuals who were cruel to the colonizers and intelligent in leading had an impetus for political dynamics in the public sphere, especially in the Estri Soldiers that he led so that they were able to destroy the enemy's logistics lines during the Java War. In modern warfare, the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda emphasizes women not only as victims of conflict but also as active agents in the process of peace and security development (Azizah N, 2021).

### ***Women's Participation and Recognition in Security***

The WPS framework emphasizes three pillars: women's participation in security decision-making, protection of the specific needs of women and children, and prevention of gender-based violence. The following data shows how women made a real contribution to the security sector during the Java War.

For example, in Rijklof van Goens' account quoted by Peter Carey (2016), it is stated that the Estri Soldier corps consists of 150 young women, and they are not only trained to use weapons, but also trained to do other skills such as dancing, singing, and playing musical instruments. This proves the existence of a pillar of direct women's participation. In the modern context stated by Murwanto et al. (2020), women's involvement in UN peacekeeping missions is seen as part of Indonesia's national strategy in carrying out its role as a *peacemaker state*. The presence of the 150 women's corps in a formal military structure demonstrates the communal capacity to engage directly in the security agenda. In WPS, women's participation at all levels from planning to security policy execution is critical for more inclusive outcomes.

The combat ability and collective discipline of Estri Warriors serve as a form of deterrent effect for enemies. They prevent attacks or anarchism through the projection of power. Although the discussion of WPS is somewhat different,

the definition is almost the same, namely looking at the context when women are involved in security tasks, the potential for violence prevention increases, because the gender dimension is considered. In the modern context, women soldiers in peace missions often play an important role in responding to the special needs of women and girls in conflict areas (Isnarti R et al., 2023).

In addition to playing an active role on the front lines of the war forces, Estri soldiers are also described as suppliers of logistics, providing space for diplomacy and strengthening the economy during wars. This further emphasizes the pillars of their involvement in the Javanese war 200 years ago. In the modern context, women peacekeepers have also made a major contribution to the establishment of technologically advanced military hospitals and the provision of vital life-saving medical assistance. (Amaliyah et al., 2023). Also through Kansil's research which said "Women's participation in national defense can be seen from various professions that can now be traced by women, such as in the fields of government, order and security, economy, and so on." (Kansil et al., 2021). Similar to the Estri Soldiers, they actively support military operations while strengthening socio-economic networks. WPS emphasizes the importance of recognizing the non-violent role of women in security, so that the policies that are prepared are not focused only on obstacles. "... The women who help provide gunpowder in the villages... bringing cash and valuables into the war zones." (Carey, pp. 25-26).

Even though it was formed hundreds of years ago, Estri Soldiers also proved themselves as elements that fulfilled the second pillar of WPS, namely the pillar of protection. Peter Carey noted that there were forty fully armed women who belonged to the Estri Soldiers to be an impressive bodyguard, they were not only a combat force, but an elite of the king's bodyguards as part of the pillars of the protection of the security system. As stated by Sari & Suryati (2023), women's participation in policy-making will have a good impact on the fulfillment of roles, including in this case the role of defense.

As a guard force, they provide direct protection to public figures, in this case the king while projecting security for the community. In the 21st century, WPS urges that this kind of role be officially recognized, not considered just a ceremonial attraction. Javanese women did this 200 years earlier than the western world. The national security perspective emphasizes that national identity is closely related to women's roles and responsibilities, and even becomes a benchmark for the success of women of a nation. If a woman is good, then the nation will prosper; On the contrary, if he did not act well, the nation would be destroyed. (Rumbekwan, 2022).

The third is the pillar of prevention, this pillar shows the importance of women's contribution to keep the peace period going. In the context of the Estri Warriors, they played a direct role through the attraction of strength and skill in front of the envoys of other countries in the Islamic Mataram kingdom. Peter Carey once said that the Estri Soldiers who showed their skills in shooting salvos were one of the skills that amazed the Dutch at that time and were reluctant to the Mataram kingdom. It has also been revealed by Tatara et al (2024) that women have played the role of commanders or military soldiers who resisted and

opposed Dutch colonialism, such as several Indonesian heroine figures, such as Malahayati.

Through the lens of WPS, Carey's quote shows that Javanese women are not only objects of protection, but subjects of security. They participate directly in military structures, carry out protective functions, and initiate preventive measures—all pillars of the WPS before the framework was pioneered globally. Recognition and formality of the role remain key challenges in the security and peace narrative. According to Matondang (2020), the giving of this role to women is inseparable from the spread of gender equality issues that encourage the demand for women's emancipation and empowerment. In this regard, women have a new role in war, namely as war actors (combatants), both those who are members of the military of a country and those who join paramilitary, insurgency, and terrorist organizations

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This research shows that the role of Estri Soldiers in the Java War cannot be seen only as a cultural phenomenon or a historical complement, but as a strategic actor in military, social, and political dynamics. The existence of these female soldiers affirms their gender involvement in the total war strategy, both through their roles as frontline combatants, the king's elite bodyguards, logistics providers, and symbols of power diplomacy. Using Clausewitz's framework, it can be seen that the Estri Warriors play a role in the show of power and the politics of resistance; through Arendt's perspective, they appear as a collective force in the public sphere; while the WPS framework shows that they have been practicing participation, protection, and prevention long before the concept was known globally.

This research confirms that the Estri Warriors were an integral part of the defense strategy of the Mataram Kingdom and Diponegoro's struggle against Dutch colonialism at that time. An inclusive historical narrative is important so that women's contributions are recognized as subjects, not just objects, in the history of war. The reconstruction of gender involvement by revealing this historical fact also opens up space for reflection on the relevance of the values of courage, solidarity, and women's emancipation for the development of national defense in the modern era.

## **ADVANCED RESEARCH**

Based on the existing literature, this research advances historical and security studies by reconstructing the role of Estri Soldiers as strategic actors within the Java War, rather than peripheral participants. By integrating classical guerrilla warfare theory, whole society perspectives, and contemporary feminist security frameworks, this study offers a multidimensional reinterpretation of women's military, political, and symbolic contributions in anti-colonial resistance. The research not only enriches Javanese war historiography but also demonstrates that principles aligned with the Women, Peace and Security agenda were practiced organically within local traditions long before their global

institutionalization, thereby challenging Eurocentric timelines of gender-inclusive security practices.

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